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Hindu Widows.

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HINDU WIDOWS.

BY ONE OF THEMSELVES.

The following touching record is taken from the *Indian Female Evangelist*. It is a translation of one of several papers written by a Hindu woman, and affords us just a glimpse of the great sense of wrong and despair which is felt by those of this despised class who have learned to think.

There are four principal castes among the Hindus, and of them all, I think the third caste, the Kaites, to which I belong, make their widows suffer most. All are treated badly enough, but our customs are much worse than those of some others. In the Punjab they are not always strict in enforcing their customs with widows; but though we live in the Punjab our family comes from the northwest, and as we are rich and well-to-do our customs are kept up scrupulously.

When a husband dies his wife suffers as much as if the death angel had come for her also. She must not be approached by any of her relations, but several women, from three to six (wives of barbers, a class who are kept up for this object), are in waiting, and as soon as the husband's last breath is drawn they rush at the new-made widow and tear off her ornaments. Ear and nose-rings are dragged off, often tearing the cartilage; ornaments plaited in with the hair are torn away; and if the arms are covered with gold and silver bracelets, they do not take the time to draw them off one by one, but holding her arm on the ground they hammer with a stone until the metal, often solid and heavy, breaks in two. It matters not to them how many wounds they inflict; they have no pity, not even if the widow is but a child of six or seven who does not know what a husband means.

At that time two sorrows come upon every widow—one from God and one from her own people, who should cherish and support her, but who desert and execrate her. If the husband die away from home, then on the arrival of the fatal news all this is done. At the funeral, the relatives, men as well as women, have to accompany the corpse to the burning ghat. If they are rich and have carriages they must not use them, but all go on foot. The men follow the corpse; the women (all the ladies well covered from sight) come after, and last the widow, led along by the barbers' wives. They take care that at least two hundred feet intervene between her and any other woman, for it is supposed that if her shadow fall on any (her tormentors excepted) she also would become a widow; therefore no relative, however much sympathy she may feel in secret, dare look on her face. One of the rough women goes in front and shouts aloud to any passer-by to get out of the way of the accursed thing, as if the poor widow were a wild beast; the others drag her along.

Arriving at the river, tank or well where the body is to be burned, they push her into the water, and as she falls so must she lie, with her clothes on, until the body has been burned, all the company have bathed, washed their clothes and dried them. When they are all ready to start for home, but not before, they drag her out, and in her wet things she must trudge home. It matters not what the weather is, in burning sun or with icy wind blowing from the Himalayas. They care not if she dies. Oh, I would rather choose the suttee! Many are happy enough to die in consequence of these sorrows, for however ill they may become, no care is taken of them or medicine given.

For fifteen days after the funeral the relatives must eat and drink only once in the day (twenty-four hours); but the widow must keep this up for

a year, with frequent fasts. When she returns from the funeral she must sit or lie in a corner on the ground, in the same clothes she had on when her husband died, whether still wet or by this time dry. Now and then one of the barbers' wives comes and looks after her, or if she is poor and not able to pay for their further kind attentions, she must sit alone.

Oh, cruel place! Each widow knows you well, and remembers you with bitterness! Separated from her husband, though she lives she is not alive! Not only is she deprived of comforts, but her friends add to her misery. Though she is in her corner alone, and must not speak to any one, they are near and talk at her in this way; her mother says: "Unhappy creature! I can't bear the thought of any one so vile; I wish she had never been born." Her mother-in-law says: "The horrid viper! She has bitten my son and killed him; now he is dead and she, useless creature, is left behind." And this even though the speakers may themselves be widows. Every indignity that the tongue can speak is heaped upon her, lest the standers-by, or perchance the gods, should think they had sympathy with her.

The sister-in-law says: "I will not look at her or speak to such a thing!" They comfort the dead man's mother and say: "It is your daughter-in-law, vile thing! who has destroyed your house; curse her! For her sake you have to mourn for the rest of your life." To the widow they say: "What good are you? Why are you still living in the world?" If she cry and show her grief, they all say: "How immodest, how abandoned—see, she is crying for her husband!" They have no pity. Only those who have been through this know what it is. You must feel this grief to prove it. Whose foot has the chilblain feels the pain. For thirteen days the widow must sit and bear this.

On the eleventh day comes a Brahmin, like a policeman who comes for a culprit, orders money and oil and other things to be given. However poor the widow may be, money, or the promise of it must be given; from the very poorest at least Rs. 13. Other Brahmins make other demands, and if the family is rich their demands are very high. A poor widow has often to labor hard for months at grinding, or some other work, to earn money to satisfy their claims.

The thirteenth day is a bad day, though then the widow may take off the clothes she has worn ever since her husband died, and may bathe. The relatives all gather and lay rupees before the widow, which are supposed to be a provision for her for life. They do not spare their reproaches. If the rupees given amount to any large sum it is taken charge of by some relative, who doles it out. Now again the Brahmins come for more money. The widow's head is shaved, and there is another Brahminical tax. The barbers' wives have to be paid.

Six weeks after the husband's death the widow must once again put on the hated clothes she wore for those thirteen days—abhorred garments! If a widow by chance catches sight of them she shudders as if a fresh widowhood were hers—and then, if possible, she must go on a pilgrimage to the Ganges, and after bathing there, the clothes may be thrown into the river.

After a year has passed away a widow who is living with her father and mother may wear ornaments again. But why is this? If you ask the parents they say, "Poor girl! she has not seen much of life; if she cannot wear jewels now while we are with her, she can never wear them, and how can she pass a long life without jewels? We can't bear to see her naked; how could we wear jewels and she sit before us bare?"

But jewels are, for widows, a great help on the downward road. I write of what I know and have seen. All men and women love to adorn themselves, but especially women love to do so that they may be seen and look fine. If widows wear jewels they will be sought after. I do not say that all widows who wear jewels are bad, but I do say they have taken one step on the bad road. Alas! that it is the parents who open the way for beloved daughters to go wrong.

The widows who have no parents are still more to be pitied; they have to serve as servants to their brothers' or sons' wives. Every one knows that if there are widows in a house servants need not be hired. A sister-in-law rules over a widow, and they quarrel night and day. If a widow remain in her husband's house, it is the same; she is hated by mother and sister-in-law, and beaten from place to place. If, for the sake of peace, she would like to live alone, she loses her character. If she has children she works for them while they are young; when her sons marry she becomes their wives' servant. If a widow is childless and rich (by the money given her after her husband's death), her relatives choose some boy to be her heir and to be provided for by her. She may bring him up with love and care, but when he gets big he takes her property, and only allows her food and clothes while she waits on his wife. A widow has no power over property supposed to be her own. It is happier for a widow to be poor and earn her living by grinding corn!

Amongst us women can inherit no cowrie of their father's wealth; it all goes to their brothers. Neither do they inherit what their husbands leave. They have only what may be given them, and if it is a lump sum, perhaps they are silly and spend it foolishly; they are not taught to take care of it properly. If a wife die she is burned in her best clothes and jewels; but a widow's corpse is wrapt

in white cloth. It is supposed that if she came to her husband in the next life without the show of mourning he would not receive her.

Why do the widows of India suffer so? Not for religion or piety. It is not written in our ancient books. In none of the Shastras or in the Mahabharata is there any sign of this suffering. What Pundit has brought it on us? Alas! that all hope is taken from us. We have not sinned; then why are thorns instead of flowers given us?

Thousands of us die, but more live. I saw a widow die—one of my cousins. She had been ill before her husband's death. When he died she was too weak to be dragged to the river. She was in a burning fever. Her mother-in-law called a water-carrier and had four large skins of water poured over her as she lay on the ground, where she had been thrown from her bed when her husband died. The chill of death came upon her; and after lying alone and untended for eight hours, her breath ceased. Every one praised her and said she had died for love of her husband.

We stand aghast at the great number of widows; how is it there are so many? The answer is, that if an article is constantly supplied and never used up it must accumulate. So it is with widows; nearly every man or boy who dies leaves one, often more; so, though thousands die, more live on.

The English have abolished the suttee; but, alas! neither the English nor the angels know what goes on in our homes! And Hindus not only don't care, but think it good! What! do not Hindus fear what such opposition may lead to! If the widow's shadow is to be dreaded, why do they darken and overshadow the whole land with it? I am told that in England they comfort widows' hearts; but there is no comfort for us.

